

The Los Angeles Silhouette Club

Black Canyon Gunfight

By: Jim Taylor

The deep dark canyons that lay alongside I-17 some 50 or 60 miles North of Phoenix, AZ hold a number of mysteries. Going North on I-17 you drop down into the edge of these great gouges in the earth near the little community of Rock Springs. Black Canyon City a little further North lays right at the mouth of them. If you keep going on I-17 the road makes a steep climb up to Sunset Point where, if you stop and look at the view, you can see down into some of the canyons themselves.

Getting off I-17 at Black Canyon City, one can find the original road where the stagecoaches ran from Phoenix and points North up through the canyons to ghost town of Bumblebee, the original Cordes Junction and on to Mayer and thence to Prescott. Even today the route is narrow, winding and great adventure for those who rarely see or travel dirt roads. "Spur-of-the-Moment" adventurers would be advised to take extra water and some survival supplies. If you break down or have some kind of problem with the vehicle it may be a while until someone comes along. Cell phones don't work quite a few places and you just may have more time than you planned on to enjoy the scenery.

The area has been home to prospectors over the last 140 years. There is mineral to be found in a number of places and while most "mines" played out or produced very little, some finds were made as is witnessed by ongoing works to this day.

It was also home to gun battles with Indians and outlaws and more than one poor soul never came out of the canyons, his bones bleaching in the Arizona sun. Quite a few of the gunfights, knife fights and fist fights were between those who knew each other at least socially and were due in large part to the quantity of alcohol that was being consumed at the time. Some of the fights were over that root of all evil - the love of money. One such little-known fight took place about 40 years ago.

It all started when the Old Man came to the Kid with news of some buried treasure. The Old Man had a thing for buried treasure and was always going off to look for some lost mine or buried bank loot. He had found just enough over the years to convince the Kid that he quite often knew what he was talking about. The gold bars the Old Man brought out of the Superstition Mountains had really raised the Kid's estimation of him. Just because one of the guys had lost a leg due to a .30-06 bullet going through his knee in no way discouraged the Kid. At his age he thought he was immortal and besides, risk was part of the price wasn't it?

Anyhow, the Old Man had come in all excited one evening. He had a story about an old prospector that was a friend of a friend. The old prospector had lived up near Black Canyon City and had been working the hills and canyons for near 30 years. He had converted his gold dust, the story went, to silver dollars and had buried them in mason jars near his cabin. How much was there no one knew for sure. Just that week someone had found the old prospector dead in his cabin. He apparently had a heart attack. He had no known family and, the story went, no money was found in the cabin. The "friend of a friend" had related that only "...a few..." people knew that the old guy had buried his money near the cabin. The Old Man was ready to go and find it.. now! Before the other guys got it. It would be finders keepers. He wanted the Kid's help to recover it, which of course the Kid was more than willing to do. Besides, it got him out of school.

The plan was to drive up to Black Canyon City about 10 PM, take the old dirt trail up toward the cabin but cut off to the side when they were about a mile from it. They would park the truck in a wash, out of sight, and hike up over a ridge to the cabin. This would bring them in from the back side of it so they could check and see if anyone had come in by the road. The Old Man figured they could be at the cabin by 12:30 that night. This should give them plenty of time to find the buried money and get out before daylight.

Backpacks were loaded, equipment put in the truck, and guns and ammunition checked. By 10 they were on the road. Conversation was sparse but excited and consisted mainly of a "what if" or "how much" subject matter. The Old Man figured they would get there before anyone else, and besides, there weren't that many people that knew about it anyhow. Right? The Kid really did not care if anyone else showed up or not. He was just happy at not having to go to school the following day.

They made good time on the road and it was before midnight when they parked the truck in the wash. The high desert was quiet and the light from the stars seemed brilliant. The Kid tied the metal detector on the top of the Old Man's backpack and they were off. The Old Man was packing his 6 1/2" Ruger .44 Magnum (*what they call a "Flat Top" nowadays ... it was the standard model then*) and the Kid has his El Tigre Model 92 .44-40 levergun. Both their backpacks had extra ammo for "just in case". The Old Man seemed a bit nervous but the Kid simply thought it was a great adventure.

The hike up over the high ridge was uneventful and the trek down the back side of the hills to the little draw where the cabin lay passed fairly quickly. All in all it took no more than 30 or 40 minutes. As they got closer to the cabin they slowed down and took their time, not wanting to make much noise. At a spot where they could see the cabin the Old Man stopped, leaned back up against a boulder and spent time just looking. It was hard to see much of anything by light of the stars, but the cabin stood in a little clearing which seemed empty. After

what seemed like an eternity but was probably no more than 5 or 10 minutes the Old Man whispered that it did not look like anyone else was around and led the way on down the hill.

They approached the cabin slowly and cautiously. The door was hanging open but all was quiet. The Old Man took off his pack and motioned for the Kid to stay where he was while he went up close and looked around. As the Kid watched, the Old Man carefully made his way up to the cabin and around it, looking in the windows and the door. Satisfying himself that it was empty he signaled the Kid to bring up the packs.

Using their flashlights sparingly they looked at the interior of the cabin. More of a shack, it appeared to have been looted. Stuff was thrown all over the floor, the bed was overturned, and the floor itself had been broken up in several places. Apparently someone had been searching already!

The Kid eased a round into the chamber of his levergun and let the hammer down to half cock... just in case he thought to himself.

The Old Man had the metal detector working by now and started to sweep the area around the shack. The Kid's heart jumped when it buzzed the first couple of times, but after digging up some scrap metal he came to expect it. Over the next hour or so the Old Man worked back and forth. There was quite a bit of junk - old tin cans, broken shovels, etc - around the place and they made working the area difficult. A lot of time was spent digging dirt away from what turned out be another false lead.

Around 2 in the morning the Old Man was working his way across the ground by the privy when he called softly for the Kid to "come here." Near the privy was a pile of scrap. Old bed springs, some broken tools, tin cans, pipe and other metal scrap littered the area. "I have an idea." the Old Man said. He told the Kid to get busy and move the scrap pile off to the side so he could sweep the area where it lay. The Kid was getting sleepy by now and he figured it would be one way to stay awake, so without complaining he leaned his rifle against the outhouse and started in moving the junk.

Once it was cleared the Old Man began sweeping the detector back and forth, crisscrossing the area where the junk had been. Several times the machine went off and the Kid and the Old Man got their shovels and went to digging. Each time they were rewarded with more scrap metal. By the 5th or 6th time the buzzer sounded the Kid figured "more junk" and was slow getting to his shovel. When he got to where the Old Man was he found him on his knees, digging with his hands in the earth. In the starlight the Kid could see that the Old Man had dug down to a wooden board and that he was trying to pry it loose from the ground.

After some struggle the Old Man got the board free, revealing a hole in the ground underneath. In the hole was a quart Mason jar! The Old Man reached in the hole and lifted the jar out, grunting as he did so. The Old Man said, "Shine your flashlight on this." When he did, the light revealed a jar full of coins! "Dad! Do you reckon there are any more jars?" the Kid asked, his voice shaking from excitement. The Old Man replied, "It's hard to tell." and then figured they could search for another hour or so before they would have to get out.

As the Old Man started to sweep the area again a voice suddenly called out of the darkness, "Freeze! Right where you are!" Scared by the unexpected command the Kid swung his flashlight toward the sound and flipped it on revealing several men standing with guns pointed at them. At the same time that he turned the light on them, one of them fired. The Kid heard or felt the bullet go past his head and he threw the flashlight to the side and dived toward the outhouse where he had leaned his rifle. As he did so he heard the Old Man's .44 go off several times.

Grabbing his rifle he frantically rolled around on the ground trying to orient himself. Where were they? Where was the Old Man? Is there a shell in the chamber? Should I shoot? At what? The thoughts flew through his head as time seemed to drag by ever so slowly. Something tugged at his sleeve and his heart leaped in his chest and his breath caught in his throat. Then he saw that it was the Old Man, signaling him to be quiet and to follow him.

Slowly they eased around the privy toward the shack. As they came up on the corner of it the Old Man whispered, "I am going to get the packs. Cover me." and he slipped away into the darkness. Straining to see, the Kid stood there, his insides shaking. He imagined he could hear someone coming behind him and turned to look, though all he could see in the starlight was darkness and shadows. His ears seemed to pick up sounds but he could not tell what they were and his heartbeat sounded really loud in his ears.

Something was moving in the darkness and as he readied himself he saw that it was the Old Man making his way back toward him. Suddenly gunfire erupted from the direction of the outhouse! He could see the muzzle flashes in the dark as whoever it was opened fire. Whether they could see them or not did not enter the Kid's mind. All he knew is that these people were shooting at him and his Dad. He stuck the barrel of his rifle around the corner of the house and levered off 5 or 6 shots as fast as he could. He would have fired more but the Old Man grabbed him and pulled him back and said, "Let's get out of here."

They circled around the cabin and then made for the ridge using the land as best they could to cover their movements. Apparently the people at the cabin did not see them leave for there were 8 or 10 more shots fired after the Kid and the Old Man pulled out. Going up the slope the Kid suddenly realized they had

left the metal detector behind. The Old Man did not seem care. When the Kid told him about it the Old Man had replied, "It wasn't a very good one anyhow."

The return to the truck seemed to take forever but at last they were there. The Old Man stopped before the went down into the wash where the truck was and waited for quite awhile. Then, making the Kid wait, he slipped down by himself just to make sure no one was waiting to give them some kind of surprise. When the Kid saw the truck lights flash he knew it was clear and made his way on down.

On the ride out they were both quiet. Once the Kid asked the Old Man if he knew who those men were and the Old Man simply said, "Nope." By the time they got through Black Canyon City and headed down I-17 both of them were feeling relaxed. The Old Man said, "Get that jar out of my pack and let's see what all is in it." It was pretty heavy when he lifted it out of the pack.

He brushed some of the dirt off it and twisted the lid open. The Old Man turned on the interior light as the Kid poured out some of the coins. After a minute they both broke out laughing. The coins were Mexican 10 and 20 pesos..... hardly a treasure!



They never went back to the old prospector's cabin. If any treasure was left there either the other treasure hunters found it, or it's still there, or perhaps it never existed in the first place. Stranger things have happened. Still, all in all the Kid thought it a grand adventure ... after the fright had eased. And he did get out of going to school the following day.

- Jim Taylor

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